

HISTORISCHE AUFNAHMEN

CHOPIN: 12 Etudes, Op. 10; 12 Etudes, Op. 25; 3 Nouvelles Etudes; GODOWSKY: Studies on Chopin's Etudes--Nos. 4, 13, 14, 15, 25, 26, 33, 36, 45, 47 & 48; Symphonic Metamorphosis on Themes from Strauss's "Die Fledermaus;" Symphonic Metamorphosis on Strauss's Waltz, "Artist's Life." David Saperton, pianist. International Piano Archives IPA 118/19, two records, distributed by Desmar.

These are the legendary recordings originally issued on three LPs by the Command Performances label. (They seem to have been that label's only issues.) They are almost the only surviving recordings of Saperton, who is remembered mostly as Godowsky's son-in-law, one of the very few pianists who could play Godowsky's music. He had a long teaching career, but was never successful as a performer.

Technically, there is some amazing playing to be heard here. As if the Chopin Etudes were not difficult enough, Godowsky has further compounded them into incredible tangles of intertwining notes. I wouldn't say Saperton makes them sound easy, but he does play them, which is in itself a technical feat of enormous proportions. The fingers that can toss off Godowsky's work are not going to have much trouble with Chopin's and Saperton also does some amazing things with the Chopin Etudes.

My opinions of all of this may well be a minority view among pianophiles who know the material involved. I have never thought much of Godowsky's music, which is indeed technically amazing but strikes me as musically uninteresting, fancy intellectual exercises with little expressive content. In the Studies on Chopin's Etudes, Godowsky does manage to compound the technical difficulties; in the process, it seems to me, he removes the poetry completely. As for Saperton's playing, it demonstrates conclusively to me why he did not have a successful performing career. Some of the Chopin originals are very bizarre indeed, and Saperton's interpretive errors are usually on the side of technique over expression, although sometimes he indulges in extreme distortions which are obviously intended to express something.

In short, hearing this set was an unusual enough experience but not a gratifying one. Since the original recordings are such superlatively scarce issues, many pianophiles will be very glad of the opportunity to hear and decide for themselves. They will find this package well produced, with fine sound and two appreciative essays on Godowsky and Saperton by Frank Cooper and the late Sidney Foster. I remember hearing Foster play very well, and I think he was a far greater artist than his teacher; too bad nobody has issued any of his recitals on records.

FALLA: Cuatro Piezas Espanolas--Nos. 1 & 2. Manuel de Falla, pianist (from Welte rolls). Soneto a Cordoba; El Amor Brujo--Cancion del fuego fatuo; Siete Canciones Populares Espanolas. Maria Barrientos, soprano; Manuel de Falla, pianist. El Amor Brujo--Danza del terror; Romance del pescador; Danza rituel del fuego. Ricardo Vines, pianist. El Sombrero de Tres Picos--3 Dances. Madrid Symphony Orchestra conducted by Enrique Fernandez Arbos. Harpsichord Concerto. Manuel de Falla, harpsichordist; Marcel Moyse, flutist; Georges Bonneau, oboist; Emile Godeau, clarinetist; Marcel Darrieux, violinist; Auguste Cruque, cellist. Psyche. Leila Ben Sedira, soprano; Pierre Jamet Instrumental Quintet. El Retablo de Maese Pedro. Blanca Seoane, soprano; Francisco Navarro, tenor; Chano Gonzalo, baritone; Champs-Elysees Theater Orchestra conducted by Ernesto Halffter. EMI (France) 153-16241/2, two records.

The surviving recordings of Manuel de Falla in performance of his own music would have easily fit onto a single LP, and one is therefore faced immediately with the question of whether this set is filled with worthwhile supplements or padding. I incline towards the former view.

The superb playing of Vines, which was such an inspiration to major composers of his day, is long overdue for better representation on LP. For some reason all of the Vines records I have heard are plagued by distant, unclear sound, but enough of the playing comes across to convince us of his great artistry and vitality. Arbos's orchestra is rather below par, but his direction is colorful and his historic importance was, of course, immense. The singing of Psyche (which I have encountered on only one other recording anyway) is exceptionally beautiful, although the program notes by Jean-Michel Nectoux do not tell of any personal connection between singer and composer. Finally, while I have heard somewhat better singing in the delightful little puppet opera, Halffter's direction brings out more emotional quality in the music than that of other conductors, and he, of course, was a pupil of the composer.

If I had eliminated anything from this set, it might well have been the Welte piano rolls, which indicate the composer's rhythmic execution of his music but precious little else. The other Falla recordings are precious indeed. The singing of the aging Barrientos, that most finished and elegant of coloratura singers, is incomparably earthy and exciting. Modern singers of Falla's music might well learn from her willingness to bend pitch and use coarse tones in the interest of projecting the music. The piano is regrettably underbalanced, but from what one can hear Falla's playing is also full of life and very well executed. (Contemporary reports claimed that he was quite a pianist.) The Harpsichord Concerto, which I regard as Falla's masterpiece, is similarly revelatory. There is little elegance here; the music boils over with intensity at every moment. This recording is gratifyingly well balanced (Nectoux mentions the considerable difficulty which the recording engineers had to overcome), and it is one of those composer performances which does indeed

point the way for future interpreters. In fact, despite some excellent modern recordings (especially those of Veyron-Lacroix/Argenta and Kipnis/Boulez), I have yet to hear this version equalled as a performance.

Halffter's recording, made in 1953, sounds superb. The Welte rolls have not been particularly well taped. The remainder of the material is all from 78s, and the dubbings are not ideal; commercial pressings seem to have been used for everything, and surface noise is always present, sometimes at fairly high levels (particularly in the Vines sides). However, the interest of the material is very great, and the sound quality as such is good. Only the recordings with Barrientos and Halffter have appeared on LP before, making this set an essential item for those who, like me, consider Falla the greatest of all modern Spanish composers.

Leslie Gerber